

Grounded: in the Body in Time & Place, in Scripture

Sensory Experience and the Gospel of John

Louise Gosbell



Meet the author

Dr. Louise Gosbell is a lecturer at Mary Andrews College in Sydney and an Honorary Research Associate of the Sydney College of Divinity. Louise completed her PhD in 2015 at Macquarie University on the language of disability in the New Testament Gospels. Her thesis was published by Mohr Siebeck in 2018.

Chapter overview

The Gospel of John is filled with body and sensory related language right from its opening chapter, with the tactile emergence of God in human flesh. The chief steward at the wedding at Cana confirms the first miracle by tasting the wine. Lazarus's sister is afraid of the stench of his body when he is raised from the dead. The perfumes used to anoint Jesus fill the room with their scent. Those who encounter Jesus are encouraged to hear and see God while he likewise sees and hears them. Even the miracles themselves in John's gospel are described by the visual term of "signs." Despite this abundance of sensory language, very little investigation has been done into the role the senses play in the Gospel of John or any of the New Testament texts. This chapter considers the role of the senses in the Gospel of John in light of current research into the senses in the ancient world and asks what it means to be embodied and sensory beings for believers today.

General Study Questions

Question 1

Spend some time practising the grounding technique based on sensory experience (p. 152: identify five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell and one thing you can taste).

Question 2

How have you understood the Gospel of John to be different to the other three (Synoptic) Gospels?

Question 3

Discuss the idea that "sensory perception is a cultural as well as a physical act" (p. 155).

Question 4

Compare John 12: 1-8 with parallel narratives in Luke 7:36-5-, Mark 14:2 3-9 and Matthew 26: 6-13. What is the difference in terms of sensory language?

Question 5

Compare John 2: 13-22 with the parallel narratives in Mark 11:15-19, Luke 19: 45-48 and Matthew 21: 12-17. What is the difference in terms of sensory language?

Question 6

Compare John's account of the resurrection of Jesus (chapter20) with the Synoptic accounts. What is the difference in terms of sensory language?

Question 7

Read John 20: 30-31 and then discuss the statement "it appears to be the expectation that a sensory experience of Jesus should lead people to belief in him and a recognition that he is God incarnate" (p.161).

Question 8

In addition to the five conventional senses, can you think of others? (Sensations derived from physical stimuli, either external or internal- one example would be the perception of heat/cold).

Question 9

Can you find any of these 'extra' senses in John's Gospel?

Question 10

The Gospels were originally heard rather than read. Choose some passages from John and see what difference it makes to your experience of them if the text is "performed" (in English or in Greek).

Academic Questions

Question 1

Why do you think so many scholars have highlighted “the inferiority of physical and sensory experience in leading people to a true faith in Jesus” (p. 153) when reading John’s Gospel?

Question 2

Do you think that miracles can lead the unfaithful to faith? Or do you agree with Craig Coster that “genuine faith, according to the fourth Gospel, is engendered through hearing” rather than seeing (p.157)?

Question 3

What do you think is the purpose of John’s “heightened sensory language” (p.161)?

Question 4

If John’s presentation of the gospel is sensory and embodied, in what ways should our response to it also be sensory and embodied?